



A Narratological Analysis of Narrative Ambiguity and Knowledge Crisis in Leave the World Behind (2023)

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-04-07 Revised: 2026-05-19 Accepted: 2026-08-30 Keywords: <i>Film Studies; Knowledge Crisis; Leave the World Behind; Narratology; Narrative Ambiguity</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.11152 Corresponding Author: Anissa Maharani Triana Putri anisamaharani291.amtp@gmail.com Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto	<i>Ambiguity and the crisis of knowledge have become significant issues in contemporary narratives, especially in films that withhold reliable information to build suspense and audience engagement. Previous studies have given limited attention to the role of narratological elements in constructing ambiguity and representing a crisis of knowledge. In this study, a knowledge crisis refers to a condition in which reliable information becomes inaccessible, causing uncertainty and difficulties in understanding reality. This study applies Gerard Genette's narratological framework to investigate how the film creates ambiguity and represents a crisis of knowledge. The research aims to analyze how narrative elements are used to portray the characters' lack of knowledge and to guide audience comprehension of information breakdown, generating suspense and thematic richness. Using a qualitative textual analysis method, data were drawn from dialogues, actions, and visual cues, then classified according to Genette's narrative categories. The findings show that fragmented chronology, unstable temporal pacing, repeated disruptions, restricted focalization, and the absence of an omniscient narrator function as narrative strategies that sustain uncertainty and immerse audiences in a crisis of knowledge. The study demonstrates that ambiguity operates not only as a stylistic device but also as a thematic strategy that encourages audience participation in meaning-making. Furthermore, this research contributes to film studies and narratology by showing how narrative form can represent epistemological uncertainty and shape audience engagement in contemporary</i>

cinema.

1. Introduction

Films function as a powerful medium for delivering messages to audiences through narrative shaped by the perspectives and the techniques of filmmakers (Obot & Andem, 2023). Narrative is a fundamental and universal form of human expression that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries (Hazel, 2020). Narratology provides a systematic approach to analyzing narrative structure by focusing on elements such as narration, focalization, narrative situation, action, story analysis, tense, time, and narrative modes (Eiranen, Hatavara, Kivimäki, Mäkelä, & Toivo, 2022). Rather than emphasizing historical or aesthetic aspects, narratology focuses on how stories are constructed and how meaning is produced through the organization of events and perspective.

In today's information – rich era, ambiguity is also important and relevant, as it is often difficult to determine the truth. This film helps to describe what might happen if the information system collapses and that connects to the reality of today's society. As de Roo (2024) highlight film experience itself remains ambiguous, since it is unclear whether it belongs to the real world. As a cinematic form, films combine language, visual imagery, and editing techniques to convey difficult subjects including knowledge gaps and comprehension crises, requiring filmmakers to create narrative ambiguity that maintains tension and engages the audience on a deeper cognitive level (Dele Bintang Ananta & Manon Andini, 2024). Fitria (2022) highlighted that the theme is the spirit or soul of each short story or film itself and in this film the theme of uncertainty and the collapse of knowledge functions as the central force that drives the conflict, shapes the narrative ambiguity, and reflects broader social and moral anxieties.

Rather than being a weakness, ambiguity can function as a narrative strategy that heightens tension and encourages audiences to actively construct meaning from incomplete information (Bente, Kryston, Jahn, & Schmälzle, 2022). Wei & Zhang (2025) highlight that narrative ambiguity emerges when important information is delayed, fragmented, or open to multiple interpretations, creating uncertainty about events and their causes. Meaning in a narrative is not fixed but is actively constructed through audience interpretation of the information provided (Arifatin, 2022). Through the organization of events, pacing, and manipulation of temporal order, narrative structures can sustain suspense and engage audiences in interpreting a story whose meaning remains only partially accessible (Quratulan, 2024).

The film highlights how the absence of trustworthy information creates confusion, fuels paranoia, and blurs the line between truth and speculation, reflecting the vulnerability of a technology-dependent society. The idea of a knowledge crisis becomes relevant in this context, as each character experiences uncertainty due to the lack of accurate information, which they are unable to access

information that is useful for understanding a situation. Crisis in knowledge deeply affects the definition of related concepts, as seen in the case of human rights where long-established understandings face challenges amid widespread violations (Tögel, 2021).

The effects of narrative ambiguity extend beyond audience interpretation and influence the way knowledge is constructed within a narrative. When information is fragmented, delayed, or potentially unreliable, both characters and audiences face difficulties in determining what can be accepted as true (van der Wal, Marañón, & Willemsen, 2023). As a result, the boundaries between fact, assumption, and speculation become increasingly blurred, creating a condition in which reliable knowledge is difficult to obtain. In this sense, ambiguity functions not only as a stylistic technique but also as a narrative mechanism that represents epistemological instability within the story world.

This research is not the first study in the field of narratology that examines narrative elements such as time, mood, and voice in film analysis. Several previous studies related to the application of narratology theory, such as discusses by Rafia Khan (2024) in *A Narratological Analysis of Mood, Voice and Tense in Herman Hesse's Siddhartha* applied Genette's framework to analyze mood, voice, and tense in *Siddhartha*, while Li (2023) examined the representation of time in *Analysis of Time Narrative in 'The Father'* through psychological, spatial, and nonlinear temporal structures. Another research with the title *A Structuralist Narratological Analysis of Mohsin Hamid's Novel the Last White Man* by Sana Anam (2024) explored character dynamics and narrative structure in *The Last White Man*, and Putri & Luthfia (2026) in *The Construction of Discursive Authority of Female War Survivor Portrayed in Salt to the Sea* applied feminist narratology to investigate narrative voice and discursive authority in *Salt to the Sea*.

Although Genette's narratological framework has been widely applied in studies of literature and film, limited attention has been given to how narrative elements construct narrative ambiguity and represent a crisis of knowledge in *Leave the World Behind*. Although previous studies have examined Genette's narratology in literary and cinematic texts, limited attention has been paid to how narrative elements simultaneously construct ambiguity and represent a crisis of knowledge in contemporary psychological thriller films. This study addresses that gap by examining the interaction among Genette's five categories in *Leave the World Behind*.

This research focuses on identifying and analyzing the narrative elements of *Leave the World Behind* using Gerard Genette's narratological framework. This study argues that these narrative elements are used to build narrative ambiguity and to represent the characters' crisis of knowledge and also suggests that the film's narrative structure enables the audiences to comprehend the breakdown of information and ambiguity, which in turn generates narrative tension and thematic richness. By combining Genette's narratological framework with the concept of knowledge crisis, this study offers a new perspective for understanding narrative

ambiguity in the film.

2. Method

Research Design:

This research employs a qualitative approach because qualitative methods are particularly useful for exploring the behaviors, perspectives, and social contexts within a specific group of people (Oranga & Matere, 2023). The focus is on examining how narrative structure constructs ambiguity and reflects a crisis of knowledge in the film. As a qualitative study, the method emphasizes description and interpretation rather than measurement, allowing the researcher to explore meaning within the narrative itself, while guided by a theoretical lens that highlights which issues are significant to examine and how they shape audience perception (Creswell, 2018). The primary data source consists of dialogues and visual scenes in the film, with particular attention to character interactions, narrative sequencing, and thematic elements connected to uncertainty and information breakdown.

Data were collected through repeated viewings of the film. During the viewing process, relevant dialogues, actions, and visual cues were identified, recorded, and coded according to their narrative functions. The coded data were then categorized into Gérard Genette's narratological elements: order, duration, frequency, mood (*focalization*), and voice. For example, scenes involving disrupted chronology or incomplete causal explanations were classified under order, repeated mysterious sounds were categorized under frequency, and scenes that restricted audience knowledge to the characters' perspectives were analyzed through mood or focalization.

The categorized data were subsequently interpreted using a descriptive-interpretative approach to examine how each narrative element contributes to the construction of narrative ambiguity and the representation of a crisis of knowledge. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of information restriction, uncertainty, and audience engagement across the narrative. To maintain analytical rigor, the film was viewed multiple times and the interpretation of data was consistently compared with Genette's theoretical categories, ensuring that conclusions were based on recurring narrative patterns rather than isolated scenes.

3. Result and Discussion

Narrative Elements

Genette divides narrative into three main parts: discourse, which is how the story is written or presented; story, which is the chronological sequence of events; and narrating, which is the act of telling the story through the roles of narrator and listener. From this framework, he developed three important categories: tense, mood, voice, which serve as fundamental in the analysis of narrative structure (Yousef, 2023). Tense is further divided into three elements: order, duration, and

frequency, while mood and voice represent the other two elements examined in this study. This analysis aims to apply Genette's narratological framework to examine how the film constructs narrative ambiguity and represents a crisis of knowledge, highlighting the ways narrative structure both shapes audience experience and enriches the film's thematic concerns.

Order

Order, as discussed by Genette, refers to the relationship between the sequence of events in the story and the way those events are presented in the narrative. For example, characters and audience are left in the dark about the cause and progression of the crisis when television broadcasts and internet access abruptly stop. The characters are unable to make sense of events that cannot be ordered into a logical timeline, this disruption of order results in a hermeneutic gap that heightens narrative ambiguity and reflects their crisis of knowing.



Figure 1. Scene of television broadcast disruption

One of the earliest disruptions of narrative order occurs when Amanda's family suddenly loses access to television and internet services. The film provides no prior warning, explanatory news report, or contextual information that could clarify the cause of the disruption. From a narratological perspective, this omission creates a gap between the occurrence of an event and the audience's understanding of its cause. According to Genette's concept of order, the absence of causal sequencing fragments the narrative and prevents both characters and audiences from constructing a coherent explanation of events. As a result, viewers experience the same uncertainty as the characters, becoming active participants in the search for meaning. This disruption marks the beginning of the film's crisis of knowledge, where reliable information is unavailable and reality becomes increasingly difficult to interpret.



Figure 2. G.H. and Ruth arrive at the house during the blackout

The arrival of G.H. and Ruth further complicates the narrative order. Although they claim to be escaping a crisis in New York, the film never provides visual confirmation of their account through flashbacks, external reports, or alternative perspectives. Consequently, the audience is unable to verify whether their explanation is accurate. This selective presentation of information fragments the narrative sequence and creates ambiguity regarding the relationship between events occurring inside and outside the house. Rather than establishing a stable chronology, the film restricts knowledge to what the characters know at a particular moment. This strategy positions audiences within the same epistemological uncertainty as Amanda and Clay, reinforcing the film's representation of a crisis of knowledge.



Figure 3. A herd of deer suddenly appears around the house

Another significant disruption of narrative order occurs when a large herd of deer unexpectedly gathers around the house. The event appears without narrative preparation or causal explanation, leaving both characters and audiences uncertain about its meaning. Rather than functioning as a conventional plot development, the scene interrupts expectations of logical progression and challenges viewers' ability to connect events within a coherent framework. From Genette's perspective, the omission of explanatory information fragments the narrative order and transforms the event into an unresolved narrative puzzle. This ambiguity encourages multiple interpretations while simultaneously highlighting the characters' inability to obtain reliable knowledge about the unfolding crisis.

Duration

Duration refers to the relationship between story time, or the actual temporal span of events, and narrative time, or the way those events are represented in the discourse. It becomes a key device for building tension and ambiguity.



Figure 4. Sitting in silence after losing access to information

Scenes that portray the characters waiting without certainty, such as Amanda and Clay sitting in silence after the sudden loss of television and internet are deliberately prolonged. The camera lingers on still moments, like anxious glances, restless movements, or the sound of shallow breathing, which makes the passage of time feel slower than it might in real life. These disruptions occupy only a few seconds of screen time, yet they have a strong impact on the narrative by shocking both the characters and the audience. Contrast between waiting scenes and condensed crisis moments demonstrates how manipulation of duration contributes to narrative ambiguity, time feels unstable, alternating between sluggish uncertainty and jarring immediacy. This instability mirrors the crisis of knowledge in the story, as characters are unable to predict or comprehend how long the danger will last or when it will strike again.

Frequency

Frequency deals with the number of times a particular event appears in the narrative, whether it occurs once, repeatedly, or is summarized as a recurring phenomenon. Genette's concept of frequency becomes crucial here, by withholding explanatory scenes and disrupting temporal flow, the film constructs a narrative where the audience, like the characters, cannot arrange events into a coherent timeline. This ambiguity heightens suspense and reflects a crisis of knowledge, showing how the collapse of frequency at the level of narrative structure mirrors the collapse of informational order within the story world.



Figure 5. The first mysterious sound scene (1:03:28)

A notable example of repetitive frequency appears in the recurring mysterious sounds heard throughout the film. The sounds repeatedly interrupt the narrative without any explanation regarding their source or cause. Rather than providing additional information, their appearance reinforces the absence of reliable knowledge surrounding the crisis. This repetition draws attention to the unresolved nature of the event and prevents both characters and audiences from constructing a stable interpretation of what is happening.



Figure 6. The second mysterious sound scene repeats (1:36:00)

The sounds reappear later in the narrative, yet the film continues to withhold any definitive explanation. From Genette's perspective, this repetitive frequency does not advance narrative understanding but instead prolongs interpretive uncertainty. Each recurrence encourages audiences to reconsider previous assumptions while simultaneously highlighting the characters' inability to obtain reliable information. As a result, repetition becomes a mechanism for sustaining suspense through the continuous postponement of explanation.

Through repetitive frequency, the film constructs a narrative environment in which explanations remain absent despite the recurrence of significant events. The audience repeatedly anticipates clarification, yet the narrative continually delays or withholds it. Consequently, frequency functions not only as a structural element of narrative organization but also as a means of representing a crisis of knowledge, where both characters and audiences remain trapped within a cycle of unanswered questions and limited understanding.

Mood (Focalization)

Mood concerns the perspective through which a story is told and the degree of information granted to the audience. The film employs an internal focalization that restricts the audience to knowing only as much as the characters. There is no omniscient narrator or external viewpoint that provides access to the “*global knowledge*” of the crisis. Instead, the narrative carefully withholds broader context, offering only fragmented accounts through the characters’ direct experiences. The effect is profound that audience are compelled to share the characters’ disorientation, fear, and speculation, which amplifies the suspense while also mirroring the instability of knowledge in a world where reliable information has collapsed.



Figure 7. Tesla driving itself on the road, with no driver visible

In this scene, the audience is restricted to the same information available to the characters: a Tesla moving without a visible driver. The film deliberately withholds any external explanation, preventing viewers from determining whether the event results from technological failure, external interference, or another unknown cause. Through restricted focalization, the audience experiences the same confusion and interpretive limitations as the characters. This narrative strategy transforms uncertainty into a shared experience, reinforcing the film’s representation of a crisis of knowledge.

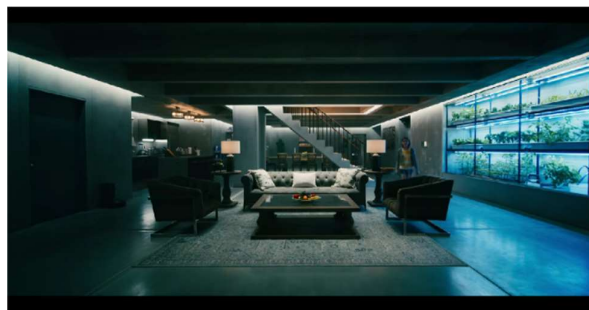


Figure 8. Rose discovers the hidden bunker

The discovery of the underground bunker is presented through Rose’s perspective, restricting audience knowledge to what she can immediately observe. Although the bunker appears to offer answers, the film withholds information

regarding its origin, purpose, and connection to the broader crisis. As a result, the audience explores the space alongside Rose, sharing her curiosity while remaining unable to fully interpret its significance. This restricted focalization sustains ambiguity by limiting access to authoritative knowledge and encouraging audiences to actively construct meaning from incomplete information.

Voice

Voice addresses who tell the story and how it is delivered, whether through an explicit narrator or through other narrative devices. In the film, there is no omniscient narrator to guide the audience or provide contextual explanations. Instead, the entire narrative unfolds through character dialogue, visual cues, and emotional reactions. Information about the crisis comes only from what the characters speculate, argue about, or personally experience, and no external narrative voice confirms or denies their assumptions. This absence of a stable narrator creates a space dominated by ambiguity, forcing audience to actively interpret events on their own and placing them with the same epistemological crisis by experiencing the same uncertainty and disorientation as the characters. The use of voice in this way reinforces the central theme of a knowledge crisis by denying any authoritative explanation, leaving the story world suspended in ambiguity.

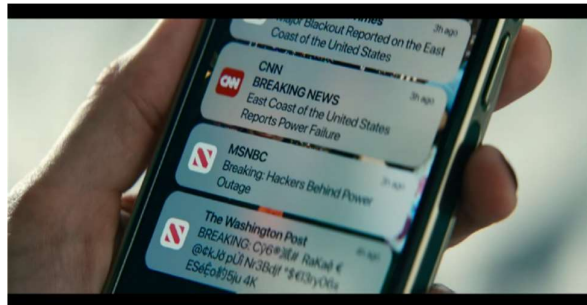


Figure 9. Conflicting news notifications

This scene illustrates the instability of narrative voice within the film. Information appears to originate from seemingly authoritative sources, yet the messages are contradictory and disappear before they can be verified. As a result, neither the characters nor the audience can determine which information, if any, should be trusted. The absence of a reliable narrative authority forces audiences to evaluate competing explanations independently, increasing their involvement in the process of interpretation. Through this strategy, voice becomes a mechanism for representing the collapse of reliable knowledge and communication.



Figure 10. Emergency alert in the bunker

The emergency alert in the bunker functions as a form of narrative voice that communicates urgency without providing meaningful explanation. Although the message appears authoritative, it offers little context regarding the nature, cause, or scope of the crisis. Consequently, the alert generates anxiety rather than understanding, leaving both characters and audiences unable to construct a coherent interpretation of events. By presenting information without sufficient explanation, the film transforms voice into a source of ambiguity rather than certainty, reinforcing the broader crisis of knowledge that shapes the narrative.

Those five categories of Genette's narratology demonstrate how the film constructs narrative ambiguity and dramatizes a crisis of knowledge. Each category contributes to the audience's experience of uncertainty, as narrative elements work in tandem to create a story world where reliable information is withheld.

Narrative Structure and Audience Comprehension

The narrative structure of *Leave the World Behind* deliberately creates fragmentation of information scenes that offer no definitive answers, conversations full of contradictions, and events left open-ended. The fragmented narrative of the film demonstrates how ambiguity can function not as a weakness but as a deliberate strategy to involve the audience in the meaning-making process. This technique places the audience in the same position of confusion as the characters, a form of limited focalization that withholds access to the whole truth. Through limited focalization, the audience is denied omniscient access to the story world and must rely on the same restricted knowledge available to the characters. In the film, unanswered questions and unexplained events push audience to imagine potential causes and outcomes, thereby deepening suspense and reinforcing the theme of a knowledge crisis. This shows that narrative ambiguity, when carefully structured, enriches the viewing experience by transforming uncertainty into an immersive and participatory form of storytelling.

While this study interprets ambiguity primarily through the lens of a crisis of knowledge, alternative readings are also possible. The film may be understood as a critique of technological dependence, a reflection of contemporary social anxiety, or an exploration of trust during periods of uncertainty. As one study observes,

suspense is a key narrative issue that significantly impacts immersion and emotional gratification, with uncertainty frequently discussed as an essential component in its creation (Delatorre, León, Salguero, Palomo-Duarte, & Gervás, 2018). By repeatedly delaying explanation and withholding reliable information, the film sustains audience anticipation and encourages continuous reinterpretation of unfolding events. However, these interpretations remain closely connected to the broader issue of knowledge instability, as the breakdown of information systems consistently shapes both character behavior and audience comprehension throughout the narrative.

Beyond its emotional impact, suspense in the film also contributes to the film's thematic richness by shaping audiences' interpretation and engagement (Aprianti, 2025). The constant uncertainty experienced by both characters and audience reflects broader anxieties about the fragility of knowledge and the human struggle to navigate a collapsing information system. The breakdown of communication technologies, the conflicting narratives between characters, and the unexplained events all highlight how modern life depends on access to reliable information, and how its absence leads to vulnerability and fear. By transforming suspense into a mirror of epistemological crisis, the narrative structure deepens the film's exploration of uncertainty, mistrust, and survival. This layered thematic dimension ensures that the film is not merely a thriller but also a reflection on the instability of human knowledge in an age of disruption.

This study contributes to narratology and film analysis by demonstrating how Genette's narrative categories can be applied not only to examine narrative structure but also to explain how films construct ambiguity and represent epistemological uncertainty. The findings show that order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice operate collectively to shape audience comprehension, making narratology a useful framework for understanding contemporary films that deliberately restrict access to information. Through this perspective, *Leave the World Behind* illustrates how narrative form itself can become a means of representing a crisis of knowledge while simultaneously deepening audience engagement.

4. Conclusion

This study has analyzed *Leave the World Behind* through Gérard Genette's narratological framework, focusing on order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, in order to examine how narrative ambiguity is constructed and how it reflects a crisis of knowledge. The findings show that fragmented chronology, unstable temporal pacing, repeated disruptions, restricted focalization, and the absence of an omniscient narrator all function as narrative strategies that deny both characters and audience access to complete information, thereby sustaining uncertainty and heightening suspense. In answering the first research question, these elements illustrate how ambiguity is built formally within the narrative

structure and used to symbolize the characters' lack of knowledge. The second research question, it becomes clear that the narrative immerses the audience in the same epistemological disorientation, turning suspense into a shared emotional and thematic experience. The film's collapse of reliable information thus resonates as more than a plot device, it becomes a reflection of broader human anxieties about uncertainty, mistrust, and survival in times of crisis. This study contributes to narratology by demonstrating how Genette's narrative categories can be used to examine the relationship between narrative ambiguity and knowledge crisis. It also contributes to film studies by highlighting how narrative form shapes audience engagement, interpretation, and thematic understanding in contemporary cinema. Future studies may examine *Leave the World Behind* from different perspectives, such as audience reception, psychological analysis, or media studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how narrative ambiguity influences interpretation.

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